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The Gazette (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) · Wed, Jul 2, 2003 · Page 50

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NOTES

Reggae tap steps up

ORIGINAL SOUNDS OF JOLI FOLIES

And Hotel Wyndham strikes better balance for after-hours jam sessions

I thought I'd seen everything after the better part of 24 jazz festivals. I was wrong. I had never seen tap-dancing reggae. Now I have. Under the acoustically sweet dome of St. James United Church on Ste. Catherine St. W., just west of the site – two artists. One is a young woman with tap shoes, a portable plywood tap floor, a little downtown skirt and style that somehow recalls Lac St. Jean as much as Sammy Davis Jr. The other is a guy with battered acoustic guitar, harmonica, holder, attempted dreads and a shuffling island sound. Together they are called Joli Folies. They do tap-dancing reggae. Spare them some change for originality alone.

JOHN GRIFFIN

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Jam sessions, the heart and soul of after-hours activity at the festival, has been a problem in recent years at the Hotel Wyndham. Two years ago the wild careening atmosphere around the hotel's large circular bar area was said to have brought complaints from its regular tourist clientele, as well as disgruntled jazz fans refused admission to the overflowing scene. Last year the session was moved into a shoebox-shaped room closed off from the bar's boozy, schoomzy atmosphere; claustrophobia reigned. This year a happy compromise has been reached. The wall separating the two rooms has been knocked down, allowing relatively free-wheeling access to sessions led by pianist Thuryn Von Pranke (playing a piano tuned too sharp).

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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Sunday night belonged to Kobayashi. The Montreal jazz-hip-hop group did a 90-minute set on the Bleue Légère stage and proved that their new CD, The Night We Took the City, was not titled by wishful thinking alone. Sounding like they've been in training 24/7, they mixed new material (crowd-rousing show-closer The Game) with old favourites (Huxtables) in a tightly-paced, flab-free set. As confirmed fans and delighted initiates dispersed after the show, it seemed clear that the group had crossed a line. If there's any justice, Kobayashi will be huge.

BERNARD PERUSSE

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The 1960s experience of the American GI came to life in all its drama, pain, and exuberance when violinist Billy Bang, an army veteran, brought his Vietnam, The Aftermath band to the Salles du Gesù Monday night. Playing from the group's award-winning CD, the band cooked on this blend of Vietnamese melodies and scales with stateside funk, blues, and hard bop. It was a memorable concert, more descriptive and swinging than gut-wrenching. Saxophonist Frank Lowe, sidelined by serious health problems, was replaced by Hamiet Bluiet on baritone sax. Playing with power and soul were pianist John Hicks, bassist Curtis Lundy, and two other vets – drummer Michael Carvin and trumpeter Ted Daniel.

IRWIN BLOCK

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Monday night's session was the highlight thus far: the sartorially resplendent saxophonist James Carter (also an avid E-Bay bidder on rare musical instruments) stormed the stage after his gig at the Django Reinhardt tribute. Carter is a highly extroverted, over-the-top blower with incredible chops. The other night it was as if the handsome fashion plate had to exorcize himself of a million notes before being able to sleep. Before he was done he was joined by German avant-garde pianist Joachim Kuhn (coming off a fascinating recital in the Solo Piano series), in one of those off-the-wall pairings you can only see at jams. In the dwindling last half hour an audience member sang Our Love Is Here to Stay. "Anything is possible," Kuhn said with a smile.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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Did Jake Langley deal a death blow to the rain that had been threatening to crash Sunday night's outdoor events? As the guitarist took the GM stage and spun out lyrical, fluid phrases, occasionally recalling Wes Montgomery, at least one spectator folded up his umbrella and used it as a guitar. At the Club du Maurier an hour later, avant-garde ensemble IKS took a saxophone's creepy one-note honking and blew it up into a cacaphony from hell. The group's anarchic, free-jazz approach occasionally conjured up visions of such genre-defying visionaries as Frank Zappa and the Soft Machine – complete with accessible moments of dark melodocism. On the Du Maurier stage, France's Jim Murple Memorial brought relief from the headache-intensity of IKS with sweet Jamaican-flavoured rhythm and blues and catchy rock-steady beats. Their cover of Jean Knight's Mr. Big Stuff seemed to be a crowd favourite. And there's no way to describe the strangeness and beauty of the Raymond Scott Orchestrette's music, which drew crowds around the GM stage at 9 p.m. The group's repertoire is entirely written by its namesake, the late composer of such cartoon-soundtrack and children-oriented fare as Oil Gusher, The Tobacco Auctioneer and Little Miss Echo.

BERNARD PERUSSE

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The jams at Upstairs, the classy little Mackay St. semi-basement club, were kicked off by tenorman David Murray (whose two-night stand at the Gesù was a gem), joining fellow Justin Time labelmate Jeff Johnstone, who leads the jam band. The biggest advantage of Upstairs is the food. While the Wyndham doesn't serve late night eats for starving musicians – members of Ray Charles's opening night entourage were asked to remove their take-in pizza from the bar area – Upstairs serves food until 3 a.m. It ain't slop either, and it doesn't cost a fortune. Whether it's burgers, seafood or steak, grilling is the specialty and the service is super-friendly. The atmosphere is a throwback to supperclubs of old and Left Bank-type bistros. Meanwhile, jams at the Savoy Room of the Metropolis have been attracting a large number of local non-jazz stars, including the young world-beat star Ariane Moffatt.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

FROM GAZETTE FILES

James Carter stormed the stage after Reinhardt tribute.

Taking his cue from Bob Dylan, Ben Harper took time off from touring to get back to basics, to the songwriting that produced Diamonds on the Inside

Have to serve somebody

T'CHA DUNLEVY
GAZETTE NEW MUSIC CRITIC

"I miss Montreal," Ben Harper says. And he knows of what he speaks. Though he has never lived here, Harper has been a fixture on the city's concert scene for years, making his way through the venues, from the old Club Soda in his early days to the Molson Centre Theatre on a recent visit.

"I just love going there," he says in a recent interview. "I've taken time off around there as well. It's a great city. ... There's a civility that I really appreciate and respect about Montreal that I don't find in other places."

Flattery will get you everywhere, Ben, as will a killer live show. Harper is a consuming performer who brings fans into his world and takes them to another place.

"I still love writing, touring and the energy that's not found anywhere except on stage with people. And I want to find a way to do that gracefully for the next 10 years," says Harper, who just released his fifth album, Diamonds on the Inside.

"Music has a way of exposing emotion and reminding us all that there's more to life than just the mundane."

Harper learned that lesson first-hand in 1978, when his father brought him to a Bob Marley concert. "From (that day)," he says, "I've been consumed in music. When I was 9, I saw Marley, and I said that's my man, that's what I've got to be doing."

And he's been doing it non-stop ever since, particularly during the last 10 years. Before he began work on Diamonds on the Inside, however, he learned that you can have too much of a good thing.

"I took a year and a half off," he explains. "That was big. It was a year to just be home and do absolutely anything I wanted. I never realized how critical it is to get your head out of your ass. When you're touring, the world does revolve around you in a way that is self-serving and very self-centred. Like Dylan said, I had to go serve somebody."

Harper spent time with his family, and accumulated the inspiration to make another album with some old friends, the original lineup of his band the Innocent Criminals from his 1995 album Fight for Your Mind – bassist Juan Nelson, drummer Oliver Charles and percussionist Leon Mobley.

"Diamonds on the Inside is a reflection of the camaraderie between (those musicians) and I," Harper says. "It's a new direction that has been given birth to by older directions. It's steeped in what we've done and stepping out into areas we've never been."

The "older directions," Harper's breathtaking combinations of folk, soul and blues, are still there, strong as ever. But they are met by ventures into straight-up funk (Bring the Funk), heavy metal (So High So Low) and traditional African song (Picture of Jesus, featuring Ladysmith Black Mambazo).

"I've always been all over the map," he says. "That's nothing new. I've just upped the ante. There was a time where I was some sort of saviour for acoustic music. And that's not a moniker I was ready to hang around my neck...

"I am acoustic folk-blues. I am carrying that light. But the rock must rock and the roots will roots and the reggae must skank. ... I'm not going to commit to one genre. Genres are too small for me. Hopefully, when I'm 10 records deep, (my music) will be it's own thing."

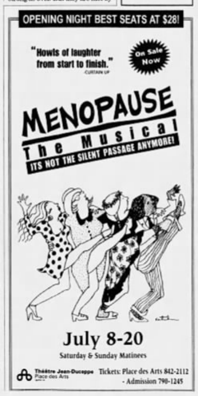
Ben Harper performs tonight and tomorrow night at 9 at Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E. Both shows are sold out.

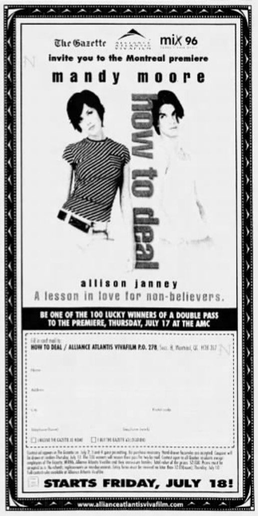
tdunlevy@
thegazette.canwest.com

JOHN MAHONEY THE GAZETTE

Ben Harper in concert in September 2000 at the Molson Centre.

JOSH FREED starts your weekend with a smile, Saturdays in The Gazette.





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